

Camaraderie and reeling in (maybe) a trout or two

Take A Vet Fishing celebrates its 10th year, at Killam's Point

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BRANFORD » A chair. A fishing rod. The late-summer sun glancing off the great pond known as the Long Island Sound. The heady aroma of burgers on a grill wafting through the balmy air.

It was a recipe that yielded "peace of mind," as Philadelphia's Larry Stephens put it on a recent Saturday, at yet another well-attended Take A Vet Fishing (TAVF) event at Killam's Point Conference Center in Branford. Stephens, an Air Force veteran who served stateside from 1966 to 1970, had come that morning from the West Haven VA Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center (EBRC), where he was following an intensive six-week course to gain the skills he needed to restore independence to his day-to-day life.

"This is a break from the daily grind but it's also a reminder of what I can still do," he said, stationed near a rocky outcropping overlooking the Sound as he waited for a fish to tug on his line.

That pretty much sums up the mission of TAVF, which started as an outreach program by the First Congregational Church of Branford in 2007 as a way to engage and provide fellowship to disabled and recovering veterans.

"We had 12 guys from the Blind Center on the first trip," said TAVF board member Bob Reinwald, seated among a group of convivial volunteers around a picnic table amid the lively rhythms of The Occasionally Jugless Jug Band. "It was [founding member] Jeff Buggee's brainchild. Our goal was 35. We had no money. In April, we celebrated our 5,000th participant."

Of course, given the numbers of disabled veterans are on a steep rise, as a report from the National Veterans Foundation shows,



PHOTO BY LISA REISMAN

At a recent Take A Vet Fishing event at Killam's Point Conference Center: Mike Grip, Air Force veteran and Disabled American Veterans (DAV) van driver; Jerry Thibodeau, Navy veteran and DAV van driver; Gottfried Beisel, volunteer; Jeff Arnsen, coordinator of TAVF CT east; Bob Reinwald, TAVF board member; Don Potter, TAVF co-founder; and Jim Woodworth, a volunteer from Trout Unlimited.

perhaps the surge in popularity is no surprise. There's also evidence that the fine motor skills used in fishing can help alleviate symptoms of PTSD, according to theveteranssite.com.

For Mike Hooper of New Haven, a self-described "city kid" who served in the Army as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, it's less about reeling in a bluefish than about the camaraderie.

"Coming out here, being with other vets, it doesn't matter in what war you served or in what service, you speak the same language, you have the same common experience," he said, as he tucked into a plate of baked ziti provided by East Haven's Aniello's Italian Restaurant while gulls swooped above.

The spread donated by Aniello's typifies the broad support in the region for TAVF. Likewise, the hot dogs and hamburgers barbecuing on the grill, and the salads and sides, from the First Congregational Church, a sponsor, along with Branford VFW Post 12106, of the event. Everything came free of charge. So did breakfast and des-

sert, as well as transportation, equipment, and whatever level of assistance a veteran might require.

To Enfield's Mike Grip, an Air Force veteran who served stateside during Vietnam and has been transporting veterans from every corner of the state to the fishing sites in a Disabled American Veterans (DAV) van for years, that kind of generosity is a no-brainer. "I feel lucky to give back," he said.

"A lot of them don't have a car to go anywhere," he said. "Just getting them out of a room in a facility where they're staring at four walls, getting them into the great outdoors, it frees them up, makes them feel less alone."

That's particularly true for someone suffering from PTSD, or contending with alcohol or substance abuse, or even homelessness, according to Jerry Thibodeau of Enfield, who served in the Navy during Vietnam

and, like Grip, drives one of the DAV vans that gets the veterans to each event.

"Some of the younger guys, you can tell when they don't want to talk, so we just leave them alone," Thibodeau said. At the very least, he added, "it gets them out of the facilities and gives us a chance to show our appreciation for their service."

Branford's Don Potter, a TAVF founding member, agreed. "I get more out of this than the veterans," said the 82-year-old. "I get a chance to thank them for all they've done."

To be sure, without the support of drivers like Grip and Thibodeau, and volunteers like Jim Woodworth, Reinwald said, "we wouldn't be able to be what we are. They help us keep going year after year."

That was true of founding member Eddie Ochman, who died in April, and was renowned for sharing



PHOTO BY LISA REISMAN

Larry Stephens of Philadelphia with Michael Provencal, instructor in mobility training at the Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center at a recent Take A Vet Fishing event at Killam's Point Conference Center.

his passion for fishing, as well as assisting veterans in baiting hooks, rigging fishing gear, and helping them with snags. It's also true of all the volunteers who show up to bake cookies, serve refreshments, prepare meals, and share conversation at any of the 16 to 18 events per year.

That said, it all goes back to the veterans. Perhaps none more so than those from Vietnam, according to Mark Matthiessen, an EBRC Blind Rehabilitation Specialist. "They're able to feel the appreciation and love that they were deprived of when they first got home."

The best part, said Joe Canzarella, assistant chief

of volunteer services at the Newington VA, is that each event "gives the guys something to look forward to, and afterwards, when they get back to the VA, they talk about everything they did for days at a time."

To think that all it takes is a chair, a fishing pole, and some good company.

For additional information, visit Take A Vet Fishing on Facebook or contact Jeff Buggee at 203-488-7201. Checks may be sent to First Congregational Church, 1009 Main St., Branford, CT 06405. Make payable to FCCB/TAVF. TAVF is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.